

raise a little hell : a song by trooper by OpheliaMarina

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Summary:

It bothers Mike, admittedly, that according to Eleven people look the same in the dark as they do in the light.

raise a little hell : a song by trooper

There was a long, long period of time, when Mike was in elementary school, where Nancy was obsessed with braiding hair because she was going to be a camp counselor. That was before she decided she wasn't good with children.

Nancy's hair was shorter then, and so was Mike's, but it didn't matter so much. It was also before Nancy started using conditioner, which did seem to matter, because she was always complaining that her hair was too thick, too frizzy, and that it was Mom's fault, somehow, genetically. When Mike asked what *genes* were, Nancy would say she'd find out in sixth grade, then complain about it some more.

"You have easy hair," she'd say despairingly, with a fist-sized knot hanging out of her head. She's on one side of the couch, struggling with her braids and half-watching *The Facts of Life* as Mike rifles through an old copy of *Popular Science*. "You got Dad's hair."

"Mm," Mike says absently, and flips to the next page. There's a picture of a wireless phone shaped like a walkie-talkie, spread out like one of Dad's bathing suit models, across two pages. "Nancy, *please* will you be the elf princess for the Elder Tree Campaign? We need an NPC to give Dustin the quest that gets everyone to go to the High Mountains."

Nancy says, "No," smartly, then winces hard as she tries to pull the knot out with her fingers.

Mike snorts, then says, "Come on, Nancy. Mom said if you said yes you could wear her purple dress you like *and* her silver necklace."

That makes her pause, a clumpy knot still hanging in her hair between her fingers. "You asked Mom if I could wear her stuff for your dumb game thing?"

"Well, *yeah*," Mike says, because obviously Nancy can't wear one of her *sweaters* to be an elf princess. "But only if you promise to help with the game. *And* read the script right, and not make fun of us."

Nancy considers this, then finishes tugging the knot, hard, out of her hair, and considers Mike for a long moment. Then she says, "Fine, okay. I'll be the elf princess or whatever."

Mike blinks, then smiles huge and vaults over to throw her arms around Nancy. Nancy squirms, Mike half in her lap. "But *only* if Mom lets me have her purple dress and the necklace," she says. "And- let me practice braiding on your hair. It's thinner than mine."

Which sounds like a fair enough deal, and that's how Mom ends up finding Mike with five small braids sticking out of her head as Nancy works furiously at braiding them all into one triple-layered braid.

"Nancy Wheeler!" she says, then kicks the TV when it talks over her. The show dissolves into static, and Nancy moans in protest. "Stop tormenting your poor brother."

"Mom, he likes it," Nancy whines, and accompanies her claim with a badly-timed tug that makes Mike yelp. "Besides, I said I would be the elf in his Dragons and Dungeons thing. If you gave me your clothes for it. He promised."

Gritting her teeth, Mike gives Mom a thumbs-up. Mom looks at them both skeptically, then sighs and shrugs. "All right, if Mike's agreed to it. I'll go get the gown out of the dresser after dinner. Nancy, you have to take those braids back out when you're done. Mike, make sure to thank your sister."

Mike yells, "For *what*?" after her, but Nancy tugs so hard on her hair that it ends as a half-shriek. "Ow! *Thank* you!"

"You're welcome," Nancy says smugly, then goes back to neatly braiding at the back of Mike's head. "You know, if I get good enough, I could braid your hair like Princess Leia's for when the new Star Wars comes out next year."

She's ninety percent sure Nancy's joking, but Mike still says, "Yeah, okay," because that actually would be cool. Lucas has been searching for ages to find a jacket like Han's and Will already looks too much like Luke for anyone else to be Luke, and Dustin has triple dibs on Chewbacca. *Someone* has to be Leia.

Nancy doesn't even pause, just huffs and tugs the braids out of Mike's hair and starts again. "Okay, I will if I can ever get this one right."

She never gets good enough to do the braided buns, but she holds up her end of the bargain for the Elder Trees campaign, and when Empire Strikes Back does come out the next year, she tucks a small braid in behind Mike's ear that she deems "good enough," and Will deems "far out," which is cool.

After that, Nancy quits braiding. Mike learns to do it, for knots.

Barb is one of the coolest people Mike's ever met. She has no idea why Barb hangs out with someone like Nancy, who cares so much what people like Steve Harrington think, when Barb doesn't really seem to care what anyone thinks.

"Hey, Michael," she says breezily, hopping up to sit on the counter next to where Mike is using a screwdriver she stole out of Dad's toolbox to fiddle with her walkie-talkie. "How's it going, bud."

"My walkie-talkie's broken," Mike says, without looking up. "Dad sat on it. I think I can fix it, though, I just don't."

Barb gives her a long look, then glances down at the walkie-talkie. "Nancy's in the shower?"

Mike nods, then curses when the antenna falls off.

"Give it here," Barb says, and Mike gives her a curious look before reluctantly handing off the walkie-talkie and the screwdriver to her. Barb fixes the antenna back up top with way too much ease, then gets to work, looking over the top of her glasses at the circuits. "So, Mike. What's new with you? We haven't talked in a while. Troy and James still giving you a hard time?"

"Don't tell Nancy," Mike says warningly, propping one elbow up on the table and looking despondently at the green insides of the walkie-talkie, being picked apart. "She'll tell Mom."

Barb smirks, popping a bunch of wires up from underneath the board

and shimmying the screwdriver in between them. “Nah. Nancy would go down there and punch Troy right in his ugly little nose. You know she used to get in trouble for fighting when we were in elementary?”

That seems super impossible. Mom at least would’ve made a big deal about it. “No way.”

“Sure,” Barb says. “No one ever told, though, because no way would Tommy H admit to having been spun round by Nancy Wheeler. Now we’ve all kind of agreed never to speak of it.” She presses the wires back down again. “Anyway, super depressing topic. Are there any girls you like, small Wheeler?”

Mike nearly falls off her stool. “What? No! Gross.”

That gets Barb to chuckle, for some reason, and she bites her lip as she starts screwing down on the walkie-talkie again. “Yeah, bud, we’ve all been there. What about boys?”

She doesn’t get it. “What *about* boys?”

“Are there any boys you like,” Barb says, patiently. “Like how Nancy likes Steve. Will, maybe? You guys are real close.”

Even then, it takes a second to get it- not just that Barb means, like, in a cooties way, but also that she means Will as a boy, and Mike as a boy, like two boys together. None of that sounds right, and it doesn’t feel right either. “No! No.”

But Barb doesn’t seem bothered, just pops the tab back onto the walkie-talkie and screws it back in. “All right, kiddo. I get it, it’s a process. Here, try this.”

Mike grabs for it, hurriedly switches it on. “Lucas? It’s Mike. Do you copy? Over.”

It takes a second, but then Lucas’s voice crackles out of it. “You fixed it?”

Lucas still hasn’t picked up on walkie-talkie etiquette. “You need to say over at the end of the thought, Lucas. Yeah, Barb fixed it. Over.”

“Cool!” Lucas says happily, then, exaggeratedly, “Over.”

Barb’s smiling at her. It makes her squirm. “Yeah, okay. Just wanted to test it out. See you tomorrow. Over and out.” She switches it back off. “Thanks, Barb.”

“No problem, Mike,” Barb says, but she still looks so smug. Nancy’s rubbing off on her too much. Barb’s way too cool to look this smug.

So Mike tries, “Are there any *girls* you like?” just to get back at her.

She doesn’t even flinch, and Mike doesn’t get as much as a response because that’s when Nancy comes into the kitchen, hair wet, wearing a short skirt and a long blouse. “All set- ugh, Mike, you turd. Stop talking to my friends.”

“You’re the turd!” Mike shoots back, and Barb laughs.

“It’s cool,” she says, then winks at Mike conspiratorially. “We were just having some girl talk. We’re all set here. Mike, you still want my leather jacket? It’s too small for me now.”

Nancy rolls her eyes, and Mike says “Yeah,” dumbly. Barb nods, waves, and then they’re both gone.

Mike thinks about Will and the phrase ‘girl talk’ for two days.

Troy twists Will’s drawing arm behind his back on account of Will’s being a fairy, and it makes Mike want to kill him.

“Let him go!” she shouts, and tries to kick backwards where her own arms are being held behind her, trying to get James right in the shin the way Nancy said to do. She totally misses. James just hefts her higher in the air.

“Let them go, you bastards!” Dustin yells, and Lucas bares his teeth, even though they’re both on the ground, Dustin with James’s foot on his back and Lucas pinned down by Troy. This is so stupid, they’re not that much smaller than those two sons of bitches, and there’s four of them, why can’t they-

Will grunts, and bends forward, and Mike kicks again. "Say you're a fairy," Troy says, his mouth right next to Will's ear. Mike can feel James's breath in her hair, hot, disgusting. "Say it."

"Fuck you!" Lucas shouts, then wheezes when he gets stomped on. "Will, don't!"

"I'm a fairy," Will says calmly. "I am."

Apparently it's not the angst-laden confession Troy and James were hoping for, but they still got what they wanted. James drops Mike, who lands hard on her ass in the dirt, and lets up Dustin, who squeaks. Troy shoves Will on top of Lucas, and both of them cry out.

"Fags," Troy says dismissively, and leaves them there.

Mike catches her breath, and inspects her arms and legs for bruises. There's one, on her knee. She'll have to hide it. Will crawls off of Lucas, pats him on the back, and says, "Are you guys all okay?"

"Are we okay?" Dustin repeats incredulously. "Will, I thought for sure he was gonna break your *arm*."

"No, I'm okay," Will says, even though his face twists up when he rolls his shoulder back into place. "I'm fine."

Mike's about to ask if Will is really okay when Lucas says, "Come on, man. You gotta stick up for yourself! We can't just cave to Troy and his cronies like that, then they win."

Will rolls his eyes, and reaches down to help Dustin up. Mike crawls up next to him, and Lucas reluctantly gets on his feet. "They win if they break my arm, or concuss Mike, or knock out Dustin's teeth," Will says. "Saying I'm a fairy doesn't *bother* me. Jonathan says letting them get to you lets them win."

Bringing Jonathan up at all was a mistake, and it's obvious the minute Lucas's face curls up at the name. "Yeah, well, Jonathan has to say that because everyone knows *he's* a freak, if he let it get to him he'd never leave the house—"

Mike is only just able to catch Will before he lunges at Lucas, and she

immediately feels terrible because Will winces when Mike grabs his arm. “Don’t *ever* say that about Jonathan again!”

“Stop it!” Mike says, just as Dustin yells “cut it out, guys!” “Fighting each other isn’t gonna help anything, come on. We gotta go to class.”

They all look at each other, then Lucas snorts, scuffs his shoe, and heads out first. Dustin glances back at Mike and Will, and Mike shoos him forward. He follows after Lucas, reluctant, and then Mike lets go of Will’s arm.

They stay standing there.

“Jonathan’s *not* a freak,” Will says angrily. He’s not looking at Mike.

“I know,” Mike says. “Jonathan’s cool. Lucas is just mad because he hates getting beat. Remember when he flipped the board over the first time he got killed by a troglodyte?”

That makes Will laugh a little, and Mike smiles. They start trudging back towards school.

“It’s not like I like getting picked on, either,” Will says, after a moment. “But Jonathan always says fighting doesn’t make you feel better. And it doesn’t. Plus it would just mean the rest of you would get hurt.”

“You don’t need to worry about us so much,” Mike says, because Will spends too much time worrying about them and about Jonathan and about his mom, when they should all be able to take care of themselves. “It’s not on you, what those jerks do to us. If you don’t wanna say you’re a fairy, you don’t have to say it because you’re worried about what’ll happen to us.”

Will’s steps slow in the hallway, and Mike’s slow with them, until they’ve both come to a complete stop. “I meant it when I said it didn’t bother me,” Will says. “It’s just a word. And I kind of feel like it sometimes.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” Will says, in a very quiet voice. “Like a... fairy, or

whatever.” Hurriedly, he continues, “Not like- like Troy says, or whatever. Not like I’m a- but. I don’t feel right, all the time. You know? Sometimes I feel like I might be one.”

Mike’s mouth is a little dry. She says, “Me too.”

And Will smiles at her, just a tiny bit. So it’s not really that bad.

Will goes missing two weeks later. They find a girl with no hair in the middle of the woods.

“It’s a game,” Mike tells El as she inspects the Dungeons & Dragons board, squeezes the pieces in her hand, holds the board over her head and stares at the bottom. “Like a board game, but different. Someone tells the story and the players make up characters to follow along and make choices and kill monsters.”

El looks over at her, then back at the bottom of the board. “Kill monsters,” she repeats, her voice very quiet.

“Yeah,” Mike says eagerly, and passes her the wizard figure. El looks very hard at it. “Yeah, or sometimes you have to run away because they’re too strong.”

Still staring at the wizard, El turns it over her hands. “Will.”

“Mhm,” Mike says. “This one’s Lucas’s, and this one’s Dustin. Dustin’s a little crappy because his dog chewed it up.”

Disregarding the comment, El says, “Doesn’t look like Will.”

Mike thinks for a moment, then says, “Oh, well. What’s fun about making up a character is you can look like whatever you think is cool. You can be whoever you want. Will likes being the wizard because-”

El interrupts. “Who are you?”

It takes a second, but then Mike sees her looking over the figures again. “Oh, I don’t have a figure. I’m Dungeon Master, I make up the story. It’s pretty cool, in our last campaign we-”

She interrupts again. “Mike.” Her index and middle fingers have fallen on the human rogue and halfling ranger, and she’s just staring again. “Who do you like to be?”

Mike swallows. “I don’t know,” she says. “I’m always Dungeon Master.”

That doesn’t stop El staring, so after a long second Mike looks away, reaches past El’s hand and pulls an elven cleric out of the box. “I think you’d like this one.”

Slowly, El takes it out of her hand, looks at it for a lengthy, silent moment, then finally smiles.

It’s the night after they fish a body that looks just like Will’s out of the lake when El sneaks into Mike’s room.

Then she just waits, by the side of the bed. Mike obviously wasn’t *asleep*, how could she be, but she’d been facing away from the door lying down, and it’s freaky flopping over to see El standing above her, framed by the light from the doorway like Norman Bates. “Jesus, El!”

El frowns, then gets down on her knees next to Mike’s bed like Mike does next to her little canopy bed in the basement. “Mike.”

And she doesn’t say anything else. Mike stays sitting up, watching her for a long moment, then says, defeatedly, “You *have* to be careful. If my mom sees you around here, she’ll call Sheriff Hopper and you’ll be taken away. Do you want to be taken away?”

Her eyes are so big, moons, as she keeps staring at Mike, and they glitter when she shakes her head once. She whispers “No,” just the way she had when Mike almost shut the bathroom door on her, and Mike immediately feels too guilty to keep fighting her.

She lies back down on her pillows, keeping her eyes on El, who keeps

her own eyes on Mike. “What do you want, El?”

For a second, it seems like El doesn’t really know, or at least she doesn’t know how to present her dilemma in under five words. Finally, she points to the floor and says, “Alone.”

“Alone,” Mike repeats, refusing to budge from her lying-down position as she puzzles it out. “You’re alone in the basement. You don’t want to be alone?”

El shakes her head, says “No,” again, and Mike sighs.

They’re definitely gonna get caught. El’s gonna get taken to Sheriff Hopper and the bad men and Mike’s gonna be grounded for the rest of her life and even after she’s dead. Mike sighs again, long and more dramatic, and El just frowns a second time. “Okay, fine. But Mom can’t find you, got it? In the morning you have to sneak back downstairs. Do you understand?”

She nods a final time, then sort of shifts in place on her knees, like she’s not sure what to do now. It takes Mike another second to figure it out herself, then she says, “Okay, you can take the bed.”

Tentatively, El crawls up onto the mattress as Mike sits up, stretching, and she pats around the mattress several times, curious, before inching under the covers one appendage at a time. Mike waits until it seems like she’s got the whole bed thing figured out, then moves to get up, in order to spread out some sheets on the floor next to the bed and lock the door, and El catches her wrist.

So Mike’s butt falls hard back on the mattress, and it squeaks, and El bounces a little. She doesn’t let go of Mike’s wrist. “What?”

El doesn’t say anything. She just stares.

This one takes a bit for Mike to figure out, but when she finally does her jaw goes a little embarrassingly loose. “We can’t sleep in the same bed! No!”

The way El’s face curls up in confusion isn’t fair. “No?”

“No!” Mike says, and her voice squeaks a little. There’s a soft sound

of movement from the hallway, probably Nancy rolling over, and she lowers her voice again. "We can't. It's weird."

El blinks. Her gaze really is so big in her face, in the dark. "Why?"

"It just is!" Mike hisses, and her voice cracks, and she winces so hard it shakes the bed a little bit. "It just is, El."

Because Mike knows about sex, obviously, she's read Nancy's weird clothes magazines and she and Will have snuck R-rated VCRs into the Byers' house and watched them when Mrs. Byers was asleep and Jonathan was out working and she just *knows*. It's not El's fault that she doesn't know, but it doesn't mean that makes it okay. It's against the rules.

El's let go of her wrist. Mike sits there for another moment, staring because El won't stop staring back, then gets up, locks the door, takes a blanket off the bed and spreads it out on the floor.

Will would always sleep on the ground, even when they slept over at Mike's house, or Lucas's. Will used to say it was better that way, that it felt more like camping. Always let someone else have the bed.

"Mike," El whispers again.

Not for the first time, Mike wonders if El can hear her thoughts. "I don't want to talk," she mutters, and rolls over, away from her.

El doesn't say anything else.

She's not a peaceful sleeper. It's a good thing Mike wasn't expecting to get much sleep anyway; El kicks around, and whimpers, and occasionally mutters to herself words Mike can't make out. She hears *Will* a couple of times, and *no*.

When Mike shakes awake out of a nightmare in the morning, El's still asleep, face scrunched up. Her arm's fallen over the side of the bed, and the tips of her fingers brush Mike's open palm.

Mike doesn't want to go to school like this.

“Go into the basement and go through the costume trunk,” Mike says. “We should have a dress that fits her down there. I can go use Nancy’s makeup on her.”

Lucas and Dustin stare. Defensively, Mike says, “What?”

“You’re gonna make her look like a clown, dude,” Lucas says skeptically. “How do you know how to do makeup?”

Suddenly it feels like she’s misstepped. “I watch Nancy do it every day,” Mike says. “It doesn’t look that hard.” Nancy also used to practice on Mike, too, like she used to practice the braids, because Barb point-blank refused to be a mannequin. It never looked clownish on Mike. It just looked natural. She could probably make Eleven look like that.

But she doesn’t have to tell Dustin and Lucas that.

They stay in the basement, rooting through the costume trunk. Mike takes El to Nancy’s room.

“You can sit there,” Mike says, indicating Nancy’s window seat, but El just wanders, looking around at the walls, at Nancy’s photos, at the shiny stuff on her dresser. She runs her fingers over it, drawing up dust.

“Nancy has a lot of dumb stuff,” Mike says, on her knees and searching through Nancy’s jewelry box for her concealer. “She never wears half of this.”

“Nancy?” El repeats.

“Oh,” Mike says, half-realizing she’s never explained Nancy and half-finding the concealer at the bottom of Nancy’s jewelry box. “Nancy’s my older sister, this is her room. You saw her picture downstairs. The pretty one.”

El hums in understanding, still wandering around as Mike plants herself on the windowsill, box full of cosmetics in front of her. She has to try again. “El, can you come over here for a sec?”

This time, El comes over and sits down across from Mike, staring at

her, their faces close together. Mike doesn't move back; she squints, imagining the way Nancy had looked at her before doing makeup on her, trying to remember what she had said.

"I'm going to touch your face with brushes and stuff," she thinks to say, when El keeps looking at her. "Is that okay?"

She hesitates for a moment. But then, still looking at Mike, she nods. "Okay."

"Okay," Mike says back, and opens the box.

Eleven's hands are always so cold. Even when Mike is wearing a jacket, she can feel Eleven's hands right through it.

She kind of wishes she could talk to Barb or Will about El's hands and how Mike can always feel them no matter what she's wearing. Out of everyone, they'd probably get it the most.

But they're gone.

Mike jumps off a cliff for Dustin, because it's what Will would've done. Turns out what Will was doing wasn't so much about worrying. It's different.

And El pulls her back up the side of the cliff.

El's lost the wig, and she's covered in dirt and her own blood, and she's honestly one of the most beautiful things Mike's ever seen. She says "I'm the monster," through her tears and nothing has ever seemed more impossible.

Her hands are still cold when they clutch the polyester of Mike's jacket, but the tiny sobbing puffs of breath she huffs out against Mike's hair feel warmer, and more real. It's a feeling like a promise.

Mike is fidgeting on the gym bleachers. El's cheek is chilly on her shoulder. Everyone's gone but them and Dustin and Lucas, and the gym feels bigger than it ever has.

"Are you okay?" she whispers to El. El shakes her head. "Do you want my watch back?"

El nods, shakily, and Mike reaches under the blanket Lucas had wrapped around them to fix the watch around her wrist again. "Do you want anything else?"

This time she shakes her head, and buries the tip of her nose in Mike's neck. Mike shivers. It's cold, and damp.

Dustin and Lucas are muttering to each other, distracted, and of course El's always quiet but right now the silence between them itches. "Hey," Mike murmurs to her. "Are you scared?"

"Yes," El whispers. A hot puff of breath.

Mike shifts a little, so she can look at the top of El's buzzed head. "What is it like? The Upside Down."

A pause. Then El mumbles, "Dark." Another beat. "Smells bad."

That makes Mike chuckle, only a little, and she can feel El's lips curl up even if she can't see it. "Sounds shitty." Another moment of silence between them, then Mike says, "You can see people in there, right? What do they look like? What did Will look like?"

El winces a little, and Mike tugs the blanket high over her shoulders again. "Sick," she whispers.

"Sick?" Mike repeats. "Will looked sick?"

She nods again, then rolls her head up to look at Mike without getting off her shoulder. "People look the same," she says. "In the dark."

"Oh," Mike says, and that sits like a rock in her lungs. Will looking sick. People looking the same in the dark as they do in the light.

Then El touches her sternum, where the rock has settled, and Mike jumps and looks at her. El's looking at her, hard, but she's smiling just a tiny bit, at the corners of her mouth, and the tip of her index finger is cold against Mike's ribcage. "Still pretty," she whispers.

It kind of knocks all the air out of her lungs, just that. El smiles a little bit more, then settles back against Mike's shoulder.

Before Mike can say anything, Dustin whines, "I'm bored," and shakes the bleachers slats as he climbs off them.

Nancy and Jonathan have left. So they go look for pudding.

Will does look sick when she gets free from the Upside Down. And she stays sick, but it's a secret.

"Eleven's still somewhere," Will tells Mike. "I can feel it. She's connected to us now."

Somewhere doesn't mean anything. Somewhere isn't here. Somewhere is probably dark and smells bad. Mike fiddles with the elven cleric. "We're not supposed to talk about it," she whispers. "Sheriff Hopper said they probably have bugs in our house."

Will looks around curiously, then inches closer against the carpet. "Mike," she whispers. "It doesn't *matter*. I could see them from the Upside Down. They're dark on the inside. They're all gonna be gone soon."

Mike tries not to look at her, in case the bugs have eyes as well as ears. "What are you talking about?"

"I can see things different," Will whispers. "Look. I know the dice is gonna roll fourteen."

She rolls a dice. It comes up fourteen. Now Mike does look at her. She keeps talking. "I know you're not really a boy. I know El is watching us right now."

That's really hard not to react to. Mike wants to shoot up, shout for

El, do *something*. She works hard to stay still.

Will finishes with, “I know the nuclear plant people don’t know what they’re doing. The gate’s still open, Mike. We gotta be careful. Here.”

She hands Mike the dice. It comes up in her palm as an eleven. Mike doesn’t know if she wants to punch Will or hug her or cry. She can’t do anything. There’re bugs.

“Be careful, Mike,” Will whispers. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mike never got her watch back. The clocks in her house keep stopping at 11:11, and there’s nothing they can do about it.

Author's Note:

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